

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on Presenting the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal

March 21, 2023

The President. Hello, hello! Thank you, thank you, thank you. Please—please have a seat.

And you know, I'm going to say, starting off—and say, "Good evening." I think they thought we'd take longer in the other room. [*Laughter*] Good afternoon/evening—close.

Vice President Harris, the Second Gentleman, former President Selina Meyer. [*Laughter*]

Welcome to the White House—a sacred place for many reasons. It's a residence for the First Family, but it's really the people's house—and it really is. A place to work, a national park, a museum, as well as an—art and artifacts capturing the soul of our Nation for many years.

This past—this—and like this portrait of George Washington painted by Gilbert Stuart, it's the only object still here since the White House was opened in 1800. That's the only object still here.

And I want you to know an Irishman designed the White House. [*Laughter*] True—true story. [*Laughter*]

Rescued by Dolley Madison after the British torched this very space, a life-size portrait of our Founding Father, who, in the midst of a war of independence, wrote a letter to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which had recently made him a member.

General Washington wrote, and I quote, "The arts and sciences [are] essential to the prosperity of the State and . . . the ornament and happiness of human life."

He knew the greatness of a nation was measured not only by the strength of its army and the vastness of its geography, the size of its economy, it was also measured by the vitality of its culture—and the culture forged in the freedom of expression to speak and to think freely.

Freedoms that must always be defended for democracy is a covenant—a covenant we have with each other. And I don't know how many times in graduate school and undergraduate school I learned that democracy has to be fought for every generation. We learned that this year. It has to be fought.

Democracy is a choice. It's a choice we make to choose union over disunion, progress over chaos, and literally truth over lies; a choice to remember history, not erase it, no matter how hard it is that people try to sometimes erase it.

And that's what great nations do: They face reality. We're a nation—a great nation in large part because of the power of the arts and humanities that's stamped into the DNA of America.

And today, Jill and I, Kamala and Doug, and all of you—we continue the legacy of awarding two of our Nation's highest honors to 23 extraordinary Americans: the National Medal of Arts to honor outstanding contributions to the excellence, growth support, and availability of the arts in the United States; and the National Humanities Medal to honor those who have—whose work has deepened the nation's understanding of the humanities and broadened our citizens' engagement with history, literature, philosophy, and so many other subjects.

And, by the way, I'm married to an English professor. [*Laughter*] And we know good writing and love a great—of a great read, including the incredible writers here today.

The work of our honorees is as diverse as the nation that celebrates with them today. But—but common threads weave them together in many ways in the very fabric of America: the pursuit of excellence, the drive to create, the yearning to connect, and the boldness to be truth-tellers, bridge builders, and change seekers.

Above all, you're masters of your craft. You're masters of your craft.

The National Medal of the Arts recipients include renowned painters like Judy Baca and—who has made a canvas out of our—out of communities all across America, especially her beloved Los Angeles. Her groundbreaking murals depict the strength and scope of human nature and tell the forgotten stories—tell the forgotten stories, bringing public space to life and tell the—and tell a fuller story of who we are as Americans.

A student—you know, and, Antonio, you studied diplomacy. When I heard that, I thought maybe we'd make you Secretary of State. *[Laughter]* But today he's one of Puerto Rico's greatest cultural ambassadors. His work challenges and unites people across languages, classes, and generations. His—creations span genres—painting, writing, sculpture, theater design. Always daring to try something new while building on what came before.

And my friend, President Julia Louis-Dreyfus. *[Laughter]* I know where you are. *[Laughter]* She's over here going, "I'm over here." No, I want to—I'm going to talk with Julia later about whether she liked being VP or President better. I got to figure that one out. *[Laughter]*

I have absolutely no talent at all. None. And you won. *[Laughter]* I don't know how the hell that happened. Eleven Emmy's. Twenty-six nominations. Honored numerous times by the Screen Actors Guild, Producers Guild, Critics' Choice. She embraces life's absurdity with absolute wit and handles real-life turns with absolute grace. A mom, a cancer survivor, a pioneer for women in comedy, she is an American original. Good to see you.

Following her example, including Mindy Kaling. You know, from Massachusetts, but as we all know, Scranton, Pennsylvania, made her who she is. *[Laughter]* Or as we say in Scranton, "Scran-en," Pennsylvania. *[Laughter]*

The first woman of color to create, write, and star in a primetime sitcom, she empowers a new generation to tell their stories with their own irreverence and sincerity. The daughter of Indian immigrants—we know about that, right? Our Vice President is a daughter of Indian immigrants—a mother who was a great scientist.

Above all, she's hardworking and an adoring mom, just like her own mom was. And, Mindy, we know your mom is always with you in your spirit. We know that.

Over 50 years ago, the Billie Holiday Theatre opened in Brooklyn. Black writers and actors from Samuel L. Jackson to Debbie Allen to Smokey Robinson debuted there in New York at that theater. Today Billie still stages first-rate theater productions, nurturing new generations of Black playwrights, performers as a culture of the cornerstone of our Nation. And it's really—it's an incredible place.

The same is true with the International Association of the—Blacks in Dance. Founded more than three decades ago to build solidarity for this vital art form, it connects dances to teach, performances to venues, educators to resources—driven by the mission of preserving dance from the African diaspora for future generations.

When it comes to fashion, here's what I know. As I said today when I said, "Every time I open the closet, I see her," when I got introduced to Vera. *[Laughter]* And—and Jill turned to me and said, "What are you saying that for?" *[Laughter]* It's all those labels. *[Laughter]* "Vera Wang."

Where is Vera? There you are. [Laughter] You knew what I meant to begin with, didn't you? At the—well, I guess I could have said it a little better. "When I open the closet, I see you all the time." But at any rate—[laughter].

You're one of the greats, Vera. You really are. And I know your dresses always look beautiful on my wife, God love her. [Laughter] Your designs are timeless. Her vision, her influence in industry. Her business became an empire. A name that's synonymous with artistry, excellence: Vera Wang.

Ladies and gentlemen, Fred Eychaner. Supporting the arts is a calling. For decades, he's been a top patron of dance companies, art museums, historic preservation—especially in his beloved Chicago.

By the way, I sat for—every time I sat here for 8 years as Vice President, it always started "Chicago." [Laughter] Chicago.

He's also been a champion for the LGBTQ community at its core of our national values of freedom, justice—and justice for all. Because he never seeks the spotlight, few know how much he has enriched their lives. But now, the nation is going to know whether you like it or not. It's happening. [Laughter]

The contribution of Joan

National Endowment for the Arts Administrator Joan Shigekawa. Shigekawa.

The President. Shigekawa. Thank you. [Laughter] I have trouble pronouncing. You can call me "Bid-en." [Laughter]

Shigekawa. Your contributions to art in America is legendary and is lasting. And the head of the National Endowment for the Arts, she's lifted rural and urban artists, created programs for military families, and helped measure how the art grows the economy—arts grow the economy. And she proves that art makes our country stronger.

He couldn't be with us today because he's touring, but he's still—we still honor a son of Puerto Rico and Spanish Harlem, José Feliciano. I can pronounce it. That's my generation.

José was—came from a small family—one of 11 brothers. [Laughter] Blind since birth, he picked up a guitar at age 9. A pioneering—artist bridging cultures and styles, winning Grammys, and opening doors for generations of Latino artists and the heart of our Nation.

Last—December, Gladys Knight, who—I'm crazy about her music; I don't want to hurt her reputation—sat in this room to receive the Kennedy Center Honor. Later that night, Jill and I, and Kamala and Doug, and a theater full of fans showed our appreciation for the "Empress of Soul." The "Empress of Soul."

A few weeks later, we invited Gladys back to the White House to perform at a summit with leaders from 50 African nations, as I honored the African nation presidents and prime ministers. But what better way to show who we are as a nation than to give Gladys Knight an opportunity to sing for the nation? Gladys, as I said before, you're truly one of the best things ever to happen, in terms of music. I'm a fan.

And speaking of good things in music, "The Boss" is here. "The Boss" is here. As they say in South Philly and North Wilmington, a "Joi-sey" boy. [Laughter]

I just want you to know, Bruce, there was a lawsuit that was between the Governor of Delaware and the Governor of New Jersey, and it's now a matter of law. We owe—we own—Delaware owns the Delaware River to the high-water mark in New Jersey. [Laughter] So, for all I know, I can claim you as part of Delaware before—[laughter].

Bruce Springsteen—a poet, troubadour, a chronicler of American life and resilience and hope and dreams. Recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom along with 20 Grammys, an Oscar, a Tony, and an unyielding love from millions of fans across generations. The New Jersey kid is back on tour, approaching—catch this—3,000 concerts around the world. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. [Laughter]

Since his first performance as a teenager at the local Elks Lodge—and I know where it is—Freehold, New Jersey. Just across the river. [Laughter] I've been to Freehold. And I married a "Joi-sey" girl. [Laughter] Okay? Bruce, some people are just "Born to Run," man. [Laughter]

Last fall, during a White House event called "A Night When Hope and History Rhyme," I awarded the National Humanities Medal to Sir Elton John on the occasion of his final tour in Washington. Today, we add to that distinguished list of award—him be—receiving this award as well.

The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Amy Tan's books capture the courage, the pain, and the joy—and the joy—of the immigrant experience, and how their legacy and memory fulfill the promise of America for all Americans.

Colson Whitehead, one of the first and only novelists to win the Pulitzer Prize for back-to-back works. How in the hell did you do that? That's—where is he? Pretty good, man. [Laughter] I'm kind of looking for back-to-back myself. [Laughter] But I—but I may have to do it in "The Underground Railroad"—[laughter]—with the "Nickel Boys." Incredible, man. That's pretty damn impressive. [Laughter]

From coming-of-age, to crime, to science fiction, to even zombies, he's one of America's great storytellers, bringing fresh perspective to the legacy of the original sin of slavery, elevating our Nation's consciousness around truth and justice.

You know, to understand the giants of history, we need, sometimes, to write about them. That's Walter Isaacson. Walter, you're the best, pal. Walter's biographies on Ben Franklin, Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, and more make real some of the most complex minds in our Nation's history. By better understanding figures like these, we better understand ourselves and our Nation and the notion of possibilities. Anything is possible here. Anything is possible in America.

An engineer, poet, Cuban American, Richard Blanco returned to a poem he wrote from the Second Inaugural of Barack and me, a poem, "One Today." It says: "And always one moon like a silent drum tapping [at] every rooftop and every window" on every—in—of every county—country. Excuse—let me start this over again. [Laughter] I'm getting so intimidated by him being here. [Laughter]

"And always one moon like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop and every window, of one country"—county—county—"all of us facing the stars; hope—a new constellation waiting for us to map it, waiting for us to name it—together."

You know, that's what we—you know, hope is a—I was once asked by Xi Jinping to define America, for real. We were in a Tibetan Plateau. I said, "Possibilities. Hope. That's the definition of America." And you write about it.

His poetry bridges cultures and languages—a mosaic of our past, our present, and our future—reflecting a nation that is hectic, colorful, and still becoming.

Few books captivated the nation like Tara Westover's memoir "Education"—"The Educated," excuse me—"Educated." Her words remind us how national divides can also divide families and how bringing [bridging; White House correction] those divides with knowledge and understanding is critical to our country and for one another.

Ann's celebrated novels and essays are treasured worldwide. Through every—through everything she does on the page and at her Nashville bookstore—a magnet for readers all around the world—she proves the power of the written word to bring people together. And you've done it, Ann. Where is Ann sitting? There you go. You've done it, kiddo.

Every day, from a studio in New Mexico, "Native America Calling" airs a podcast, live radio show exploring everything from the legacy of Native newspapers to Native cuisine to Native American solidarity with Ukraine, capturing the vastness of the Native American life and its profound impact on the country.

You know, Henrietta as a teacher, a scholar, and a leader, she's dedicated her career to Native American education and to establishing the field of Native American studies.

Thanks in large part to her, Native American studies [studies; White House correction] is now taught in universities across the country, strengthening our Nation-to-nation bonds for generations to come.

A scholar, Earl chronicles African American history and explores how diversity strengthens our Nation. And it does strengthen our Nation. As a university administrator, he has shaped some of our preeminent institutions, pushing them to meet the challenges of our time—from water scarcity, to the future of work, to racial injustice. He makes American universities an even more important source of our national dynamism.

And an—as an anthropologist, the first Black woman president of Spelman College—pretty cool—[laughter]—and the director of the National Museum of African Art, you know, Johnnetta is—Cole—takes the study of Black history and culture to new heights.

She has strengthened American education, advanced American scholarship, and enriched the lives of students of all ages and the future of our Nation.

Bryan Stevenson, a cherished son of my home State of Delaware and one of the most important civil rights leaders. You know, exonerating the wrongfully convicted. Funding [Founding; White House correction] the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice so the history of lynching and racial violence in America gets the reckoning it deserves. And providing a compelling foundation for me to be able to sign into law the Emmett Till's—name—to make lynching a Federal crime.

Bryan does it all—challenges us to get proximity to the suffering and abandoned and the poor and the condemned so that as we search for the humanity in others, we find it within ourselves first.

Ladies and gentlemen, please congratulate our newest recipients of the National Medal of the Arts and the National Humanities Medal.

To you and your families—to you and your families, congratulations. Thank you for cultivating the arts as an essential source—please have a seat—[laughter]—source of our prosperity, our happiness in American life, as George Washington described. Thank you for strengthening the covenant that this is our—that is our democracy.

And now, please come up one by one as my military aide, Major Hughes, reads your citation.

And, by the way, I want to warn you: There are two types. There—the medals are beautiful. The ribbons are hung on. One doesn't separate. So, any woman who I'm giving the one medal to, just don't get angry with me if I mess up your hair. [Laughter] Okay?

You think I'm kidding. I'm not. All right. [Laughter]

[At this point, Maj. Ann L. Hughes, USSF, Space Force Aide to the President, read the citation for National Medal of Arts recipient Judith F. Baca. The President then presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Taylor C. Kellogg, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President.]

The President. I think this weighs more than the first prize at the Olympics. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citation for National Medal of Arts recipient The Billie Holiday Theatre, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg. Blondel Pinnock, board member, The Billie Holiday Theatre, and president and chief executive officer, Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, accepted the medal on behalf of the theatre.]

The President. *[Inaudible]* *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Medal of Arts recipients Fred Eychaner and the International Association of Blacks in Dance, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg. Denise Saunders Thompson, president and chief executive officer, International Association of Blacks in Dance, accepted the medal on behalf of the organization.]

Audience member. Amen. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Medal of Arts recipients Mindy Kaling and Gladys Knight, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg.]

Audience member. Amen. *[Laughter]*

The President. That was one of the Pips. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Medal of Arts recipients Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Antonio Martorell-Cardona, Joan Shigekawa, Bruce Springsteen, and Vera Wang, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg.]

Audience member. Amen. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Humanities Medal recipients Richard Blanco and Johnnetta Betsch Cole, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg.]

Audience member. Amen. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Humanities Medal recipient Walter Isaacson, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg. After receiving the medal, Mr. Isaacson began to walk to his seat and then returned.]

[Laughter]

The President. Maybe he didn't want a picture. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Humanities Medal recipients Earl Lewis and Henrietta Mann, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg.]

Audience member. Amen.

Audience member. Amen. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Humanities Medal recipients "Native America Calling," Ann Patchett, and Bryan Stevenson, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg. Jaclyn Sallee, president and chief executive officer, Kohanic Broadcasting Corp., accepted the medal on behalf of the "Native America Calling" radio program.]

Audience member. Amen.

Audience member. Amen. *[Laughter]*

[Maj. Hughes read the citations for National Humanities Medal recipients Amy Tan, Tara Westover, and Colson Whitehead, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Kellogg.]

Audience member. Amen. [Laughter]

The President. What do I do now? [Laughter]

Well, everybody, I—hope you—you enjoyed today. Just—it was just such an honor to meet so many incredible people, really and truly. You're amazing. And you do make the country better. You make us a better place. [Applause] You make us a better place.

And now there's going to be a reception at the—other end of the hall, in the dining room down there. I hope we'll see you down there.

And as—every time I'd walk out of my grandpop's home up in Scranton, Pennsylvania—Ambrose Finnegan—he'd say, "Joey, keep the faith." And my grandmother would go, "No, spread it." [Laughter] Let's spread the faith. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:50 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; Gov. John C. Carney, Jr., of Delaware; Gov. Philip D. Murphy on New Jersey; former President Barack Obama; and President Xi Jinping of China. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal presentation.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Allen, Debbie; Baca, Judith F.; Biden, Jill T.; Blanco, Richard; Carney, John C., Jr.; Cole, Johnnetta B.; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Eychaner, Fred; Feliciano, José; Harris, Kamala D.; Hughes, Ann L.; Isaacson, Walter; Jackson, Samuel L.; John, Elton; Kaling, V. Mindy; Knight, Gladys M.; Lewis, Earl; Louis-Dreyfus, Julia; Mann, Henrietta; Martorell-Cardona, Antonio; Murphy, Philip D.; Obama, Barack; Patchett, Ann; Robinson, William "Smokey," Jr.; Shigekawa, Joan; Springsteen, Bruce; Stevenson, Bryan; Tan, Amy; Wang, Vera E.; Westover, Tara; Whitehead, Colson; Xi Jinping.

Subjects: China, President; Delaware, Governor; Economic improvement; Education, global competitiveness; Hate crimes and race-based violence; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); Immigration; Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, equality; Military families; National Humanities Medal; National Medal of Arts; New Jersey, Governor ; Presidential Medal of Freedom; Racial equality, improvement efforts; Slavery, U.S. (historical); Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes; Vice President.

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